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# Deconstructing the Gecekondu

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## Deconstructing the Gecekondu

Jean-François Pérouse

**Abstract.** This paper is a short, English version of the introducing paper of the thematic issue, originally in French : “Les tribulations du terme *gecekondu* (1947-2004) : une lente perte de substance. Pour une clarification terminologique », *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, Thematic Issue N°1 - Gecekondu, URL : <http://www.ejts.org/document117.html>

It will soon be 50 years (according to Yerasimos, Vaner: 1988) since the word *gecekondu* – a prime example of the vividness of expression in Turkish<sup>1</sup> – came into use. Yet the word is so overused that it has all but lost its relevance, conceptual accuracy and explanatory power. As Ersan Ocak puts it in a recent article (2002: 91), the word *gecekondu* is a 'ready-to-think' product, 'the conceptualization [of which] is insufficiently inadequate'. As an inhibiting rundown of research on contemporary Turkey, the word *gecekondu*, calls nothing clear to mind, and therefore cannot be used any more as such without spreading prejudice or confusion. One can even say that this word has become (from the scientific point of view) counter-productive. Taking inventory of all the scientific fields in which it is used (urbanism, architecture, sociology, anthropology, ethnology, geography or political sciences) demonstrates the crisis of misuse and misconception that the word is facing. Moreover, its various translations show all its polysemy and vacuity: translated into French by '*bidonville*', in English by 'slum', 'shanty' or 'squatter's house' or 'squatter town', each of these translations is in fact an interpretation that refer to research traditions and development-oriented state interventions everywhere but in its Turkish context. And we'd better be conscious of this if we mean to build on a common language. In that respect, instead of repeating usual but always frightening figures – like for example one million *gecekondu* in Istanbul, representing half of all the city's constructions! – a more accurate and closer look at it seemed necessary.

[2] Scholars overuse the word *gecekondu* to make arguments about urban poverty, internal migration, urban land ownership, social movements, housing policies or self-construction practices; each author has his/her personal and implicit vision of the *gecekondu*. What is the use of giving the exact number of *gecekondu* in Turkey – or even the number of those being built every day – or the percentage of the urban population living in *gecekondu*, if one doesn't know what it's all about?

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<sup>1</sup> Other new words were developed on the model of *gecekondu* : *apartkondu*, *mezarkondu*, *camikondu*, *surkondu*, *kent kondu*, *seçimkondu*...

[3] In other words, shall we ban from scientific debates this 'concept' which doesn't seem to fulfill any satisfying heuristic function? Otherwise, in which conditions shall we use it and what precautions shall we develop? How shall we reconcile it with the architectural approach (that is willingly or unwillingly fetishizing a type of construction which is in fact historically dated<sup>2</sup>), with the urbanistic approach (which is more interested in legal mechanics), and with the sociological or anthropological approach? The present work aims to collectively deconstruct the *gecekondu*, in order to possibly build it anew. In that respect, we have invited the contributors of this issue to reread the major writings on the issue (Yavuz 1953, Öğretmen 1957, Gençay 1962, Yasa 1966, Yörükhan 1968, Asma 1971, Keleş 1972, Akçay 1974, Şen 1975, Karpat 1976) so as to come together with a common language that would be more accurate and operational. In that way, we might be able to free the debate from a too systematic assimilation of *gecekondu* with for example peripheries, urban poverty, or with illegal housing. The definition first suggested in 1953 by Fehmi Yavuz could be referred to as a starting point of study: 'The *gecekondu* are hastily erected buildings, lacking most of the times elementary comfort conditions, not conforming to construction regulations and being developed regardless the land owner's rights'<sup>3</sup>.

[4] In this *EJTS* issue, following the sound advice of Şenyapılı (1998), we propose articles oriented on the following questions regarding *gecekondu* (without limiting the topic to housing problems):

[5] The first general and conceptual paper by Jean-François Pérouse traces the history of a word and its conceptual drift. In the same time, through an auto-critical approach, the author reexamines the use of the concept by research in order to identify its contradictions and ambiguities, as well as the underlying *gecekondu* ideologies in scientific

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<sup>2</sup> What is actually encouraging some architects to affirm that no more *gecekondu* are being built today.

<sup>3</sup> Let us note that this definition is surprisingly close to the one we find in the well-known "gecekondu law" passed in 1966, which states in article 2: 'In this law, the term Gecekondu refers to illicit constructions, that were built regardless the general regulations and directives determining construction work requirements, regardless the soils on which building is permitted or not, regardless the fact that land do not belong to the builder and that *gecekondu* are being built without the owner's authorization'.

debates. This work leads to redefine the concept<sup>4</sup> and enables to clarify what we are talking about in debates.

[6] We believed it might be interesting to look back at one of the most used scientific reference on the *gecekondu* phenomenon, *The gecekondu : Rural Migration and Urbanization* (1976), more than twenty five years after its release. Its author, Kemal H. Karpat, details the genesis of this writing. What is its reach and impact? Can we trace back its lineage?

[7] Benoit Fliche then tries to understand the *gecekondu* beyond common categories like "rural" or "urban". He argues that the *gecekondu*, which has often been described as a "urban village" should be analysed through more relevant categories, after looking at the daily practices and discourses.

[8] The fourth article, by Tahire Erman and Naslıhan Tok, reviews *gecekondu* studies in order to reveal the changing representations of the phenomenon in the academic field. They show that *gecekondu* is always built as a figure of the "Other".

[9] In his paper on the image of *gecekondu* through Turkish movies, Mehmet Öztürk grants attention to the Turkish film industry in order to understand how movies have contributed to the myth of *gecekondu* since the 1960s.

[10] Tansı Şenyapılı tries to untangle the logic behind the development of *gecekondu*. Could it only be a kind of land and real estate speculation? Moreover, is the systematically mentioned relation with migration towards larger cities, housing crisis and development of *gecekondu* always relevant? In other words, is the development of *gecekondu* the automatic answer to the housing crisis, that is itself a result from the migration pressure to large cities?

[11] Marie Leray then studies local politics, local memories and *gecekondu* in *Bir Mayıs Mahallesi*. Policemen's representations, passed on by the media, tend to present

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<sup>4</sup> Beside the given definitions, let's mention the one by Gençay (1962 : 5), which prioritizes the illegal feature of the occupancy : 'Hastily built housing, on a land that do not belong to the builder breaking construction laws and regulations, regardless sanitary and technical requirements and norms'.

*gecekondu* like hideouts and even natural breeding grounds for illegal political organizations. From the 'liberated zones' of the 1970s to the recent case of Küçükarmutlu, it seemed interesting to give a closer look at this relation. Marie Leray's approach, based on a field study in *Bir Mayıs Mahallesi*, gives some insight into organized and territorialized collective mobilization processes on *gecekondu* scenes.

[12] Considering the *gecekondu* as an environment with specific features, Heidi Wedel finally examines how *gecekondu* districts pre-structure social space and political participation. She shows that gendered place and space in *gecekondu* lead to gendered political priorities and action. The article discusses the effects and constraints of women's collective actions regarding political awareness, local leaders, and formal political participation.

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